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## DRAMATIC IDYLS



# DRAMATIC IDYLS

BY

ROBERT BROWNING



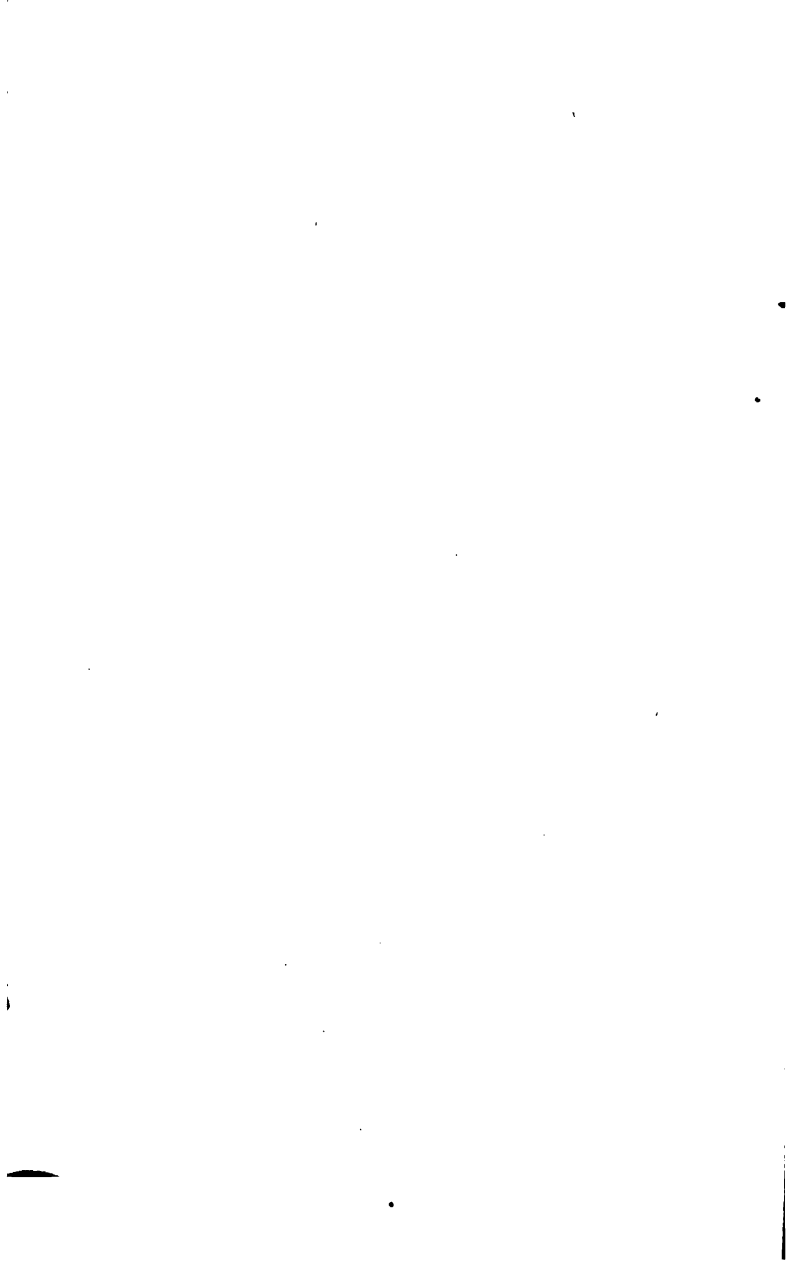
LONDON

SMITH, ELDER, & CO., 15 WATERLOO PLACE

1879

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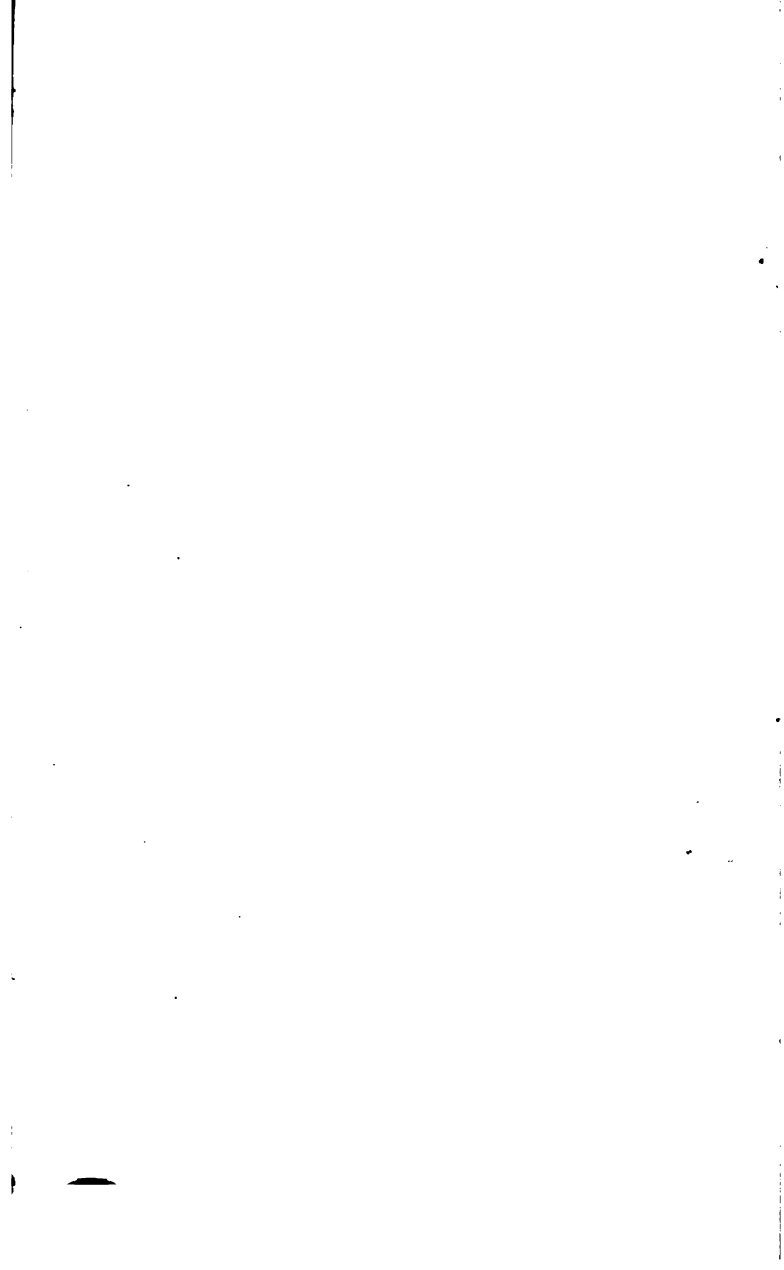
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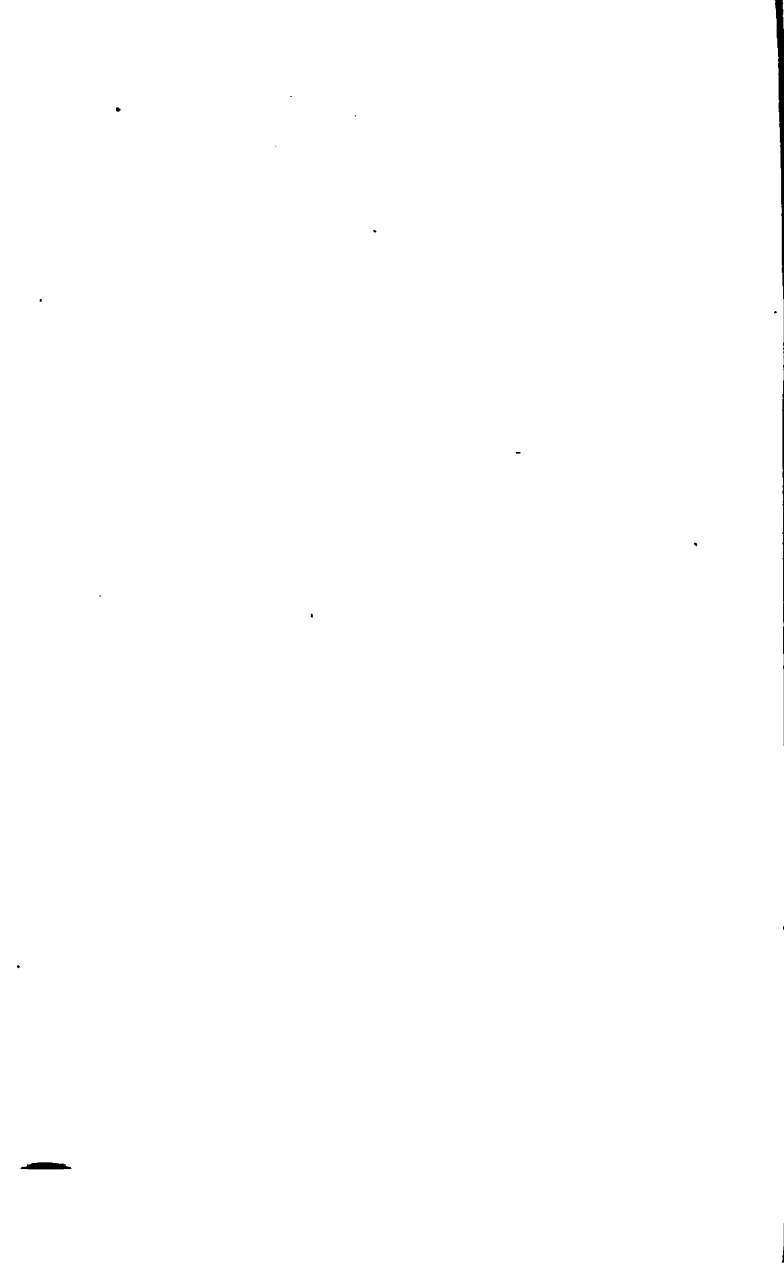


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MARTIN RELPH



*MARTIN RELPH.*

*My grandfather says he remembers he saw, when a  
    youngster long ago,*

*On a bright May day, a strange old man, with a beard as  
    white as snow,*

*Stand on the hill outside our town like a monument of  
    woe,*

*And, striking his bare bald head the while, sob out the  
    reason—so !*

If I last as long as Methuselah I shall never forgive  
myself :

But—God forgive me, that I pray, unhappy Martin  
Relph,

As coward, coward I call him—him, yes, him ! Away  
from me !

Get you behind the man I am now, you man that I used  
to be !

What can have sewed my mouth up, set me a-stare, all  
eyes, no tongue ?

People have urged “ You visit a scare too hard on a lad  
so young !

You were taken aback, poor boy,” they urge, “ no time to  
regain your wits :

Besides it had maybe cost you life." Ay, there is the cap  
which fits !

So, cap me, the coward,—thus ! No fear ! A cuff on  
the brow does good :

The feel of it hinders a worm inside which bores at the  
brain for food.

See now, there certainly seems excuse : for a moment, I  
trust, dear friends,

The fault was but folly, no fault of mine, or if mine, I  
have made amends !

For, every day that is first of May, on the hill-top, here  
stand I,

Martin Relph, and I strike my brow, and publish the  
reason why,

When there gathers a crowd to mock the fool. No fool,  
friends, since the bite

Of a worm inside is worse to bear : pray God I have  
balked him quite !

I'll tell you. Certainly much excuse ! It came of the  
way they cooped

Us peasantry up in a ring just here, close huddling be-  
cause tight-hooped

By the red-coats round us villagers all : they meant we  
should see the sight

And take the example,—see, not speak, for speech was  
the Captain's right.



“ You clowns on the slope, beware ! ” cried he : “ This  
woman about to die

Gives by her fate fair warning to such acquaintance as  
play the spy.

Henceforth who meddle with matters of state above  
them perhaps will learn

That peasants should stick to their plough-tail, leave to  
the King the King’s concern.

“ Here’s a quarrel that sets the land on fire, between  
King George and his foes :

What call has a man of your kind—much less, a woman  
—to interpose ?

Yet you needs must be meddling, folks like you, not  
foes—so much the worse !

The many and loyal should keep themselves unmixed  
with the few perverse.

“Is the counsel hard to follow? I gave it you plainly a  
month ago,

And where was the good? The rebels have learned just  
all that they need to know.

Not a month since in we quietly marched : a week, and  
they had the news,

From a list complete of our rank and file to a note of  
our caps and shoes.

“All about all we did and all we were doing and like  
to do !

Only, I catch a letter by luck, and capture who wrote it,  
too.

Some of you men look black enough, but the milk-white  
face demure

Betokens the finger foul with ink: 't is a woman who  
writes, be sure!

"Is it 'Dearie, how much I miss your mouth!'—good  
natural stuff, she pens? "

Some sprinkle of that, for a blind, of course: with talk  
about cocks and hens,

How 'robin has built on the apple-tree, and our creeper  
which came to grief

Through the frost, we feared, is twining afresh round  
casement in famous leaf.'

“But all for a blind ! She soon glides frank into ‘Horrid the place is grown

With Officers here and Privates there, no nook we may call our own :

And Farmer Giles has a tribe to house, and lodging will be to seek

For the second Company sure to come (’t is whispered) on Monday week.’

“And so to the end of the chapter ! There ! The murder, you see, was out :

Easy to guess how the change of mind in the rebels was brought about !

Safe in the trap would they now lie snug, had treachery made no sign :

But treachery meets a just reward, no matter if fools  
malign !

“ That traitors had played us false, was proved—sent news  
which fell so pat :

And the murder was out—this letter of love, the sender  
of this sent that !

’T is an ugly job, though, all the same—a hateful, to have  
to deal

With a case of the kind, when a woman’s in fault : we  
soldiers need nerves of steel !

“ So, I gave her a chance, despatched post-haste a mes-  
sage to Vincent Parkes

Whom she wrote to ; easy to find he was, since one of  
the King's own clerks,

Ay, kept by the King's own gold in the town close by  
where the rebels camp :

A sort of a lawyer, just the man to betray our sort—the  
scamp !

“ ‘ If her writing is simple and honest and only the lover-  
like stuff it looks,

And if you yourself are a loyalist, nor down in the rebels'  
books,

Come quick,' said I, ' and in person prove you are each  
of you clear of crime,

Or martial law must take its course : this day next week's  
the time ! '

“Next week is now : does he come? Not he ! Clean  
gone, our clerk, in a trice !

He has left his sweetheart here in the lurch : no need of  
a warning twice !

His own neck free, but his partner's fast in the noose  
still, here she stands

To pay for her fault. 'T is an ugly job : but soldiers  
obey commands.

“And hearken wherefore I make a speech ! Should any  
acquaintance share

The folly that led to the fault that is now to be punished,  
let fools beware !

Look black, if you please, but keep hands white : and,  
above all else, keep wives—

Or sweethearts or what they may be—from ink ! Not a  
word now, on your lives ! ”

Black ? but the Pit’s own pitch was white to the Cap-  
tain’s face—the brute

With the bloated cheeks and the bulgy nose and the  
blood-shot eyes to suit !

He was muddled with wine, they say : more like, he was  
out of his wits with fear ;

He had but a handful of men, that’s true,—a riot might  
cost him dear.

And all that time stood Rosamund Page, with pinioned  
arms and face



Bandaged about, on the turf marked out for the party's  
firing-place.

I hope she was wholly with God : I hope 't was His angel  
stretched a hand

To steady her so, like the shape of stone you see in our  
church-aisle stand.

I hope there was no vain fancy pierced the bandage to  
vex her eyes,

No face within which she missed without, no questions  
and no replies—

“ Why did you leave me to die ? ”—“ Because . . . ” Oh,  
fiends, too soon you grin

At merely a moment of hell, like that—such heaven as  
hell ended in !

Let mine end too ! He gave the word, up went the  
guns in a line :

Those heaped on the hill were blind as dumb,—for, of  
all eyes, only mine

Looked over the heads of the foremost rank. Some fell  
on their knees in prayer,

Some sank to the earth, but all shut eyes, with a sole ex-  
ception there.

That was myself, who had stolen up last, had sidled  
behind the group :

I am highest of all on the hill-top, there stand fixed  
while the others stoop !

From head to foot in a serpent's twine am I tightened : /  
touch ground?

No more than a gibbet's rigid corpse which the fetters  
rust around !

Can I speak, can I breathe, can I burst—aught else but  
see, see, only see ?

And see I do—for there comes in sight—a man, it sure  
must be !—

Who staggeringly, stumblingly, rises, falls, rises, at ran-  
dom flings his weight

On and on, anyhow onward—a man that's mad he  
arrives too late !

Else why does he wave a something white high-flourished  
above his head ?

Why does not he call, cry,—curse the fool !—why throw  
up his arms instead ?

O take this fist in your own face, fool ! Why does not  
yourself shout “Stay !

Here ’s a man comes rushing, might and main, with  
something he ’s mad to say ?”

And a minute, only a moment, to have hell-fire boil up  
in your brain,

And ere you can judge things right, choose heaven,—  
time ’s over, repentance vain !

They level : a volley, a smoke and the clearing of smoke :  
I see no more

Of the man smoke hid, nor his frantic arms, nor the  
something white he bore.

But stretched on the field, some half-mile off, is an  
object. Surely dumb,

Deaf, blind were we struck, that nobody heard, not one  
of us saw him come !

Has he fainted through fright ? One may well believe !

What is it he holds so fast ?

Turn him over, examine the face ! Heyday ! What,  
Vincent Parkes at last ?

Dead ! dead as she, by the self-same shot : one bullet  
has ended both,

Her in the body and him in the soul. They laugh at  
our plighted troth.

“ Till death us do part ? ” Till death us do join past  
parting—that sounds like

Betrothal indeed ! O Vincent Parkes, what need has my  
fist to strike ?

I helped you : thus were you dead and wed : one bound,  
and your soul reached hers !

There is clenched in your hand the thing, signed, sealed,  
the paper which plain avers

She is innocent, innocent, plain as print, with the King's  
Arms broad engraved :

No one can hear, but if anyone high on the hill can see,  
she 's saved !

And torn his garb and bloody his lips with heart-break,—  
plain it grew

How the week's delay had been brought about : each  
guess at the end proved true.

It was hard to get at the folks in power : such waste of  
time ! and then

Such pleading and praying, with, all the while, his lamb  
in the lion's den !

And at length when he wrung their pardon out, no end  
to the stupid forms—

The licence and leave : I make no doubt—what wonder  
if passion warms

The pulse in a man if you play with his heart ?—he was  
something hasty in speech ;

Anyhow, none would quicken the work : he had to be-  
seech, beseech !

And the thing once signed, sealed, safe in his grasp,—  
what followed but fresh delays?

For the floods were out, he was forced to take such a  
roundabout of ways!

And 't was "Halt there!" at every turn of the road, since  
he had to cross the thick

Of the red-coats: what did they care for him and his  
"Quick, for God's sake, quick!"

Horse? but he had one: had it how long? till the first  
knave smirked "You brag

Yourself a friend of the King's? then lend to a King's  
friend here your nag!"

Money to buy another? Why, piece by piece they  
plundered him still



With their "Wait you must,—no help : if aught can help  
you, a guinea will ! "

And a borough there was—I forget the name—whose  
Mayor must have the bench

Of Justices ranged to clear a doubt : for "Vincent," thinks  
he, sounds French !

It well may have driven him daft, God knows ! all man  
can certainly know

Is—rushing and falling and rising, at last he arrived in a  
horror—so !

When a word, cry, gasp, would have rescued both ! Ay.  
bite me ! The worm begins

At his work once more. Had cowardice proved—that  
only—my sin of sins !

Friends, look you here ! Suppose . . . suppose . . .

But mad I am, needs must be !

Judas the Damned would never have dared such a sin  
as I dream ! For, see !

Suppose I had sneakingly loved her myself, my wretched  
self, and dreamed

In the heart of me “She were better dead than happy  
and his !”—while gleamed

A light from hell as I spied the pair in a perfectest em-  
brace,

He the saviour and she the saved,—bliss born of the very  
murder-place !

No ! Say I was scared, friends ! Call me fool and  
coward, but nothing worse !

Jeer at the fool and gibe at the coward ! 'T was ever  
the coward's curse

That fear breeds fancies in such : such take their shadow  
for substance still,

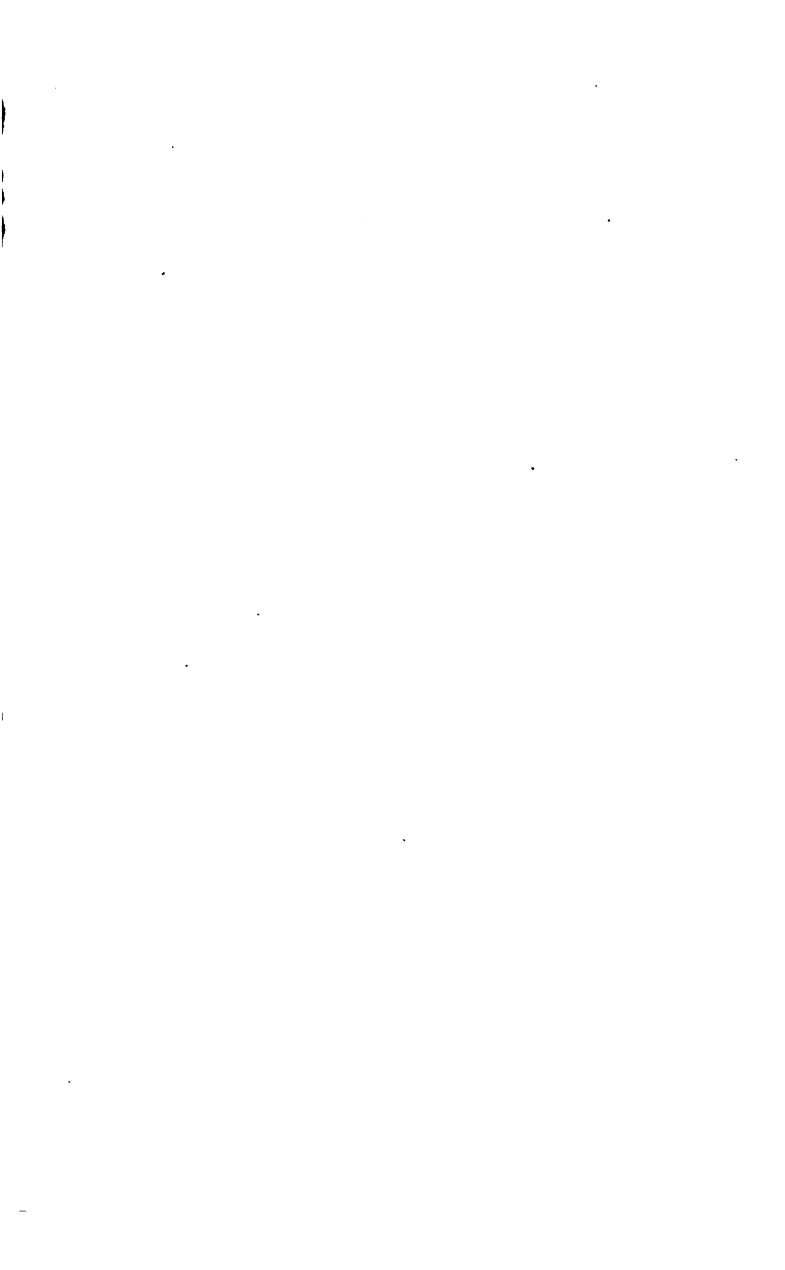
—A fiend at their back. I liked poor Parkes,—loved  
Vincent, if you will !

And her—why, I said “Good morrow” to her, “Good  
even,” and nothing more :

The neighbourly way ! She was just to me as fifty had  
been before.

So, coward it is and coward shall be ! There 's a friend,  
now ! Thanks ! A drink  
Of water I wanted : and now I can walk, get home by  
myself, I think.

# PHEIDIPPIDES



*PHEIDIPPIDES.*

*χαίρετε, νικῶμεν.*

First I salute this soil of the blessed, river and rock !  
Gods of my birthplace, demons and heroes, honor to all !  
Then I name thee, claim thee for our patron, co-equal in  
praise

—Ay, with Zeus the Defender, with Her of the ægis and  
spear !

Also, ye of the bow and the buskin, praised be your  
peer,

Now, henceforth and forever,—O latest to whom I up-  
raise

Hand and heart and voice ! For Athens, leave pasture  
and flock !

Present to help, potent to save, Pan—patron I call !

Archons of Athens, topped by the tettix, see, I return !

See, 't is myself here standing alive, no spectre that  
speaks !

Crowned with the myrtle, did you command me, Athens  
and you,

“ Run, Pheidippides, run and race, reach Sparta for aid !

Persia has come, we are here, where is She ? ” Your  
command I obeyed,

Ran and raced : like stubble, some field which a fire runs  
through,



Was the space between city and city : two days, two  
nights did I burn

Over the hills, under the dales, down pits and up peaks.

Into their midst I broke : breath served but for " Persia  
has come !

Persia bids Athens proffer slaves'-tribute, water and  
earth ;

Razed to the ground is Eretria—but Athens, shall Athens  
sink,

Drop into dust and die—the flower of Hellas utterly die,  
Die, with the wide world spitting at Sparta, the stupid,  
the stander-by?

Answer me quick, what help, what hand do you stretch  
o'er destruction's brink?

How,—when? No care for my limbs!—there's lightning in all and some—

Fresh and fit your message to bear, once lips give it birth!"

O my Athens—Sparta love thee? Did Sparta respond?  
Every face of her leered in a furrow of envy, mistrust,  
Malice,—each eye of her gave me its glitter of gratified  
hate!

Gravely they turned to take counsel, to cast for excuses.  
I stood

Quivering,—the limbs of me fretting as fire frets, an inch  
from dry wood:

"Persia has come, Athens asks aid, and still they debate?"

Thunder, thou Zeus! Athene, are Spartans a quarry  
beyond

Swing of thy spear? Phoibos and Artemis, clang them  
‘Ye must’!”

No bolt launched from Olumpos! Lo, their answer at  
last!

“Has Persia come,—does Athens ask aid,—may Sparta  
befriend?

Nowise precipitate judgment—too weighty the issue at  
stake!

Count we no time lost time which lags through respect  
to the Gods!

Ponder that precept of old, ‘No warfare, whatever the  
odds

In your favour, so long as the moon, half-orbed, is unable to take

Full-circle her state in the sky !' Already she rounds to it fast :

Athens must wait, patient as we—who judgment suspend."

Athens,—except for that sparkle,—thy name, I had mouldered to ash !

That sent a blaze through my blood ; off, off and away was I back,

—Not one word to waste, one look to lose on the false and the vile !

Yet "O Gods of my land !" I cried, as each hillock and plain,

Wood and stream, I knew, I named, rushing past them  
again,

“ Have ye kept faith, proved mindful of honors we paid  
you erewhile ?

Vain was the filleted victim, the fulsome libation ! Too  
rash

Love in its choice, paid you so largely service so slack !

“ Oak and olive and bay,—I bid you cease to enwreathe  
Brows made bold by your leaf ! Fade at the Persian’s  
foot,

You that, our patrons were pledged, should never adorn a  
slave !

Rather I hail thee, Parnes,—trust to thy wild waste  
tract !

Treeless, herbless, lifeless mountain ! What matter if  
slacked

My speed may hardly be, for homage to crag and to cave  
No deity deigns to drape with verdure,—at least I can  
breathe,

Fear in thee no fraud from the blind, no lie from the  
mute ! ”

Such my cry as, rapid, I ran over Parnes' ridge ;  
Gully and gap, I clambered and cleared till, sudden, a  
bar  
Jutted, a stoppage of stone against me, blocking the way.  
Right ! for I minded the hollow to traverse, the fissure  
across :

“ Where I could enter, there I depart by ! Night in the  
fosse ?

Out of the day dive, into the day as bravely arise ! No  
bridge

Better ! ”—when—ha ! what was it I came on, of wonders  
that are ?

There, in the cool of a cleft, sat he—majestical Pan !

Ivy drooped wanton, kissed his head, moss cushioned  
his hoof :

All the great God was good in the eyes grave-kindly—  
the curl

Carved on the bearded cheek, amused at a mortal's awe,  
As, under the human trunk, the goat-thighs grand I saw.

“ Halt, Pheidippides ! ”—halt I did, my brain of a whirl :

“Hither to me! Why pale in my presence?” he  
gracious began :

“How is it,—Athens, only in Hellas, holds me aloof?

“Athens, she only, rears me no fane, makes me no feast!  
Wherefore? Than I what godship to Athens more  
helpful of old?

Ay, and still, and forever her friend! Put Pan to the  
test!

Go, bid Athens take heart, laugh Persia to scorn, have  
faith

In the temples and tombs! Go, say to Athens, ‘The  
Goat-God saith :

When Persia—so much as strews not the soil—is cast in  
the sea,



Then praise Pan who fought in the ranks with your most  
and least,  
Goat-thigh to greaved-thigh, made one cause with the  
free and the bold !

“ Say Pan saith : ‘ Let this, foreshowing the place, be the  
pledge ! ’ ”

(Gay, the liberal hand held out this herbage I bear  
—Fennel, whatever it bode—I grasped it a-tremble with  
dew)

“ While, as for thee . . . ” But enough ! He was  
gone. If I ran hitherto—

Be sure that, the rest of my journey, I ran no longer, but  
flew.

Here am I back. Praise Pan, we stand no more on the  
razor's edge !

Pan for Athens, Pan for me ! myself have a guerdon too !

---

Then Miltiades spoke. "And thee, best runner of  
Greece,

Whose limbs did duty indeed,—what gift is promised  
thyself?

Tell it us straightway,—Athens the mother demands of  
her son ! "

Rosily blushed the youth : he paused : but, lifting at  
length

His eyes from the ground, it seemed as he gathered the  
rest of his strength

Into the utterance—"Pan spoke thus : ' For what thou  
hast done

Count on a worthy reward ! Henceforth be allowed  
thee release

From the racer's toil, no vulgar reward in praise or in  
pelf !'

" I am bold to believe, Pan means reward the most to  
my mind !

Fight I shall, with our foremost, wherever this fennel  
may grow,—

Pound—Pan helping us—Persia to dust, and, under the  
deep,

Whelm her away for ever ; and then,—no Athens to  
save,—

Marry a certain maid, I know keeps faith to the brave,—  
Hie to my house and home : and, when my children  
    shall creep  
Close to my knees,—recount how the God was awful yet  
    kind,  
Promised their sire reward to the full—rewarding him  
    —so !”

---

Unforseeing one ! Yes, he fought on the Marathon day :  
So, when Persia was dust, all cried “To Akropolis !  
Run, Pheidippides, one race more ! the meed is thy due !  
‘Athens is saved, thank Pan,’ go shout !” He flung  
    down his shield,  
Ran like fire once more : and the space ’twixt the Fen-  
    nel-field

And Athens was stubble again, a field which a fire runs  
through,

Till in he broke : " Rejoice, we conquer ! " Like wine  
through clay,

Joy in his blood bursting his heart, he died—the bliss !

So, to this day, when friend meets friend, the word of  
salute

Is still " Rejoice ! "—his word which brought rejoicing  
indeed.

So is Pheidippides happy for ever,—the noble strong man  
Who could race like a God, bear the face of a God,  
whom a God loved so well

He saw the land saved he had helped to save, and was  
suffered to tell

Such tidings, yet never decline, but, gloriously as he  
began,

So to end gloriously—once to shout, thereafter be mute :  
“ Athens is saved ! ”—Pheidippides dies in the shout for  
his meed.

HALBERT AND HOB





*HALBERT AND HOB.*

Here is a thing that happened. Like wild beasts  
whelped, for den,

In a wild part of North England, there lived once two  
wild men

Inhabiting one homestead, neither a hovel nor hut,

Time out of mind their birthright : father and son, these  
—but—

Such a son, such a father ! Most wildness by degrees

Softens away : yet, last of their line, the wildest and  
worst were these.

Criminals, then? Why, no : they did not murder and  
rob ;

But, give them a word, they returned a blow—old Hal-  
bert as young Hob :

Harsh and fierce of word, rough and savage of deed,  
Hated or feared the more—who knows?—the genuine  
wild-beast breed.

Thus were they found by the few sparse folk of the  
country-side ;

But how fared each with other? E'en beasts couch, hide  
by hide,

In a growling, grudged agreement : so, father and son  
lay curled

The closelier up in their den because the last of their  
kind in the world.

Still, beast irks beast on occasion. One Christmas night  
of snow,

Came father and son to words—such words ! more cruel  
because the blow

To crown each word was wanting, while taunt matched  
gibe, and curse

Competed with oath in wager, like pastime in hell,—nay,  
worse :

For pastime turned to earnest, as up there sprang at  
last

The son at the throat of the father, seized him and held  
him fast.

“ Out of this house you go ! ”—(there followed a hideous  
oath)—

“ This oven where now we bake, too hot to hold us both !  
If there’s snow outside, there’s coolness : out with you,  
bide a spell

In the drift and save the sexton the charge of a parish  
shell ! ”

Now, the old trunk was tough, was solid as stump of oak  
Untouched at the core by a thousand years : much less  
had its seventy broke

One whipcord nerve in the muscly mass ‘from neck to  
shoulder-blade

Of the mountainous man, whereon his child’s rash hand  
like a feather weighed

Nevertheless at once did the mammoth shut his eyes,  
Drop chin to breast, drop hands to sides, stand stiffened  
—arms and thighs

All of a piece—struck mute, much as a sentry stands,  
Patient to take the enemy's fire : his captain so commands.

Whereat the son's wrath flew to fury at such sheer scorn  
Of his puny strength by the giant eld thus acting the babe  
new-born :

And “ Neither will this turn serve ! ” yelled he. “ Out  
with you ! Trundle, log !

If you cannot tramp and trudge like a man, try all-fours  
like a dog ! ”

Still the old man stood mute. So, logwise,—down to floor

Pulled from his fireside place, dragged on from hearth  
to door,—

Was he pushed, a very log, staircase along, until

A certain turn in the steps was reached, a yard from the  
house-door-sill.

Then the father opened his eyes—each spark of their  
rage extinct,—

Temples, late black, dead-blanced,—right-hand with  
left-hand linked,—

He faced his son submissive; when slow the accents  
came,

They were strangely mild though his son's rash hand on  
his neck lay all the same.

“ Halbert, on such a night of a Christmas long ago,  
For such a cause, with such a gesture, did I drag—so—  
My father down thus far : but, softening here, I heard  
A voice in my heart, and stopped : you wait for an outer  
word.

“ For your own sake, not mine, soften you too ! Untrod  
Leave this last step we reach, nor brave the finger of  
God !

I dared not pass its lifting : I did well. I nor blame  
Nor praise you. I stopped here : Halbert, do you the  
same ! ”

Straightway the son relaxed his hold of the father's throat.  
They mounted, side by side, to the room again : no note

Took either of each, no sign made each to either : last  
As first, in absolute silence, their Christmas-night they  
passed.

At dawn, the father sate on, dead, in the self-same place,  
With an outburst blackening still the old bad fighting-  
face :

But the son crouched all a-tremble like any lamb new-  
yeaned.

When he went to the burial, someone's staff he borrowed,  
—tottered and leaned.

But his lips were loose, not locked,—kept muttering,  
mumbling. “There !



At his cursing and swearing !” the youngsters cried : but  
the elders thought “ In prayer.”

A boy threw stones : he picked them up and stored them  
in his vest.

So tottered, muttered, mumbled he, till he died, perhaps  
found rest.

“ Is there a reason in nature for these hard hearts ? ” O  
Lear,

That a reason out of nature must turn them soft, seems  
clear !



IVÀN IVÀNOVITCH



*IVÀN IVÀNOVITCH.*

“They tell me, your carpenters,” quoth I to my friend  
the Russ,

“Make a simple hatchet serve as a tool-box serves  
with us.

Arm but each man with his axe, ’t is a hammer and saw  
and plane

And chisel, and—what know I else? We should imitate  
in vain

The mastery wherewithal, by a flourish of just the adze,  
He cleaves, clamps, dovetails in,—no need of our nails  
and brads,—

The manageable pine : 't is said he could shave himself  
With the axe,—so all adroit, now a giant and now an elf,  
Does he work and play at once !”

Quoth my friend the Russ to me,  
“Ay, that and more besides on occasion ! It scarce  
may be

You never heard tell a tale told children, time out of  
mind,

By father and mother and nurse, for a moral that 's  
behind,

Which children quickly seize. If the incident happened  
at all,

We place it in Peter's time when hearts were great not  
small,

Germanized, Frenchified. I wager 't is old to you

As the story of Adam and Eve, and possibly quite as true."

---

In the deep of our land, 't is said, 'a village from out  
the woods

Emerged on the great main-road 'twixt two great  
solitudes.

Through forestry right and left, black verst and verst of  
pine,

From village to village runs the road's long wide bare line.

Clearance and clearance break the else-unconquered  
growth

Of pine and all that breeds and broods there, leaving loth  
Man's inch of masterdom,—spot of life, spirt of fire,—

---

To star the dark and dread, lest right and rule expire  
Throughout the monstrous wild a-hungred to resume  
Its ancient sway, suck back the world into its womb :  
Defrauded by 'man's craft which clove from North to  
South

This highway broad and straight e'en from the Neva's  
mouth

To Moscow's gates of gold. So, spot of life and spirt  
Of fire aforesaid, burn, each village death-begirt  
By wall and wall of pine—unprobed undreamed abyss.

Early one winter morn, in such a village as this,  
Snow-whitened everywhere except the middle road  
Ice-roughed by track of sledge, there worked by his  
abode



Ivàn Ivànovitch, the carpenter, employed  
On a huge shipmast trunk ; his axe now trimmed and  
toyed  
With branch and twig, and now some chop athwart the  
bole  
Changed bole to billets, bared at once the sap and soul.  
About him, watched the work his neighbours sheepskin-  
clad ;  
Each bearded mouth puffed steam, each grey eye  
twinkled glad  
To see the sturdy arm which, never stopping play,  
Proved strong man's blood still boils, freeze winter as he  
may.  
  
Sudden, a burst of bells. Out of the road, on edge

Of the hamlet—horse's hoofs galloping. "How, a sledge?  
What's here?" cried all as—in, up to the open space,  
Workyard and market-ground, folks' common meeting-  
place,—

Stumbled on, till he fell, in one last bound for life,  
A horse : and, at his heels, a sledge held—"Dmìtri's  
wife !

Back without Dmìtri too ! and children—where are they?  
Only a frozen corpse !"

They drew it forth : then—"Nay,  
Not dead, though like to die ! Gone hence a month ago:  
Home again, this rough jaunt—alone through night and  
snow—

What can the cause be? Hark—Droug, old horse, how  
he groans :

His day 's done ! Chafe away, keep chafing, for she  
moans :

She 's coming to ! Give here : see, motherkin, your  
friends !

Cheer up, all safe at home ! Warm inside makes  
amends

For outside cold,—sup quick ! Don't look as we were  
bears !

What is it startles you ? What strange adventure  
stares

Up at us in your face ? You know friends—which is  
which ?

I 'm Vàssili, he 's Sergel, Ivàn Ivànovitch . . .”

At the word, the woman's eyes, slow-wandering till they  
neared

The blue eyes o'er the bush of honey-coloured beard,  
Took in full light and sense and—torn to rags, some  
dream

Which hid the naked truth—O loud and long the scream

She gave, as if all power of voice within her throat

Poured itself wild away to waste in one dread note !

Then followed gasps and sobs, and then the steady flow

Of kindly tears : the brain was saved, a man might know.

Down fell her face upon the good friend's propping knee ;

His broad hands smoothed her head, as fain to brush it

free

From fancies, swarms that stung like bees unhived. He

soothed—

“Loukèria, Louscha !”—still he, fondling, smoothed and smoothed.

At last her lips formed speech.

“Ivàn, dear—you indeed !

You, just the same dear you ! While I . . . O intercede,  
Sweet Mother, with thy Son Almighty—let his might  
Bring yesterday once more, undo all done last night !  
But this time yesterday, Ivàn, I sat like you,  
A child on either knee, and, dearer than the two,  
A babe inside my arms, close to my heart—that’s lost  
In morsels o’er the snow ! Father, Son, Holy Ghost,  
Cannot you bring again my blessed yesterday ?”

When no more tears would flow, she told her tale : this  
way.

“ Maybe, a month ago,—was it not?—news came here,  
They wanted, deeper down, good workmen fit to rear  
A church and roof it in. ‘ We ’ll go,’ my husband said :  
‘ None understands like me to melt and mould their lead.’  
So, friends here helped us off—Ivàn, dear, you the first !  
How gay we jingled forth, all five—(my heart will burst)—  
While Dmìtri shook the reins, urged Droug upon his  
track !

“ Well, soon the month ran out, we just were coming  
back,  
When yesterday—behold, the village was on fire !  
Fire ran from house to house. What help, as, nigh and  
nigher,

The flames came furious? 'Haste,' cried Dmìtri, 'men  
must do

The little good man may : to sledge and in with you,  
You and our three ! We check the fire by laying flat  
Each building in its path,—I needs must stay for that,—  
But you . . . no time for talk ! Wrap round you every  
rug,

Cover the couple close,—you'll have the babe to hug.  
No care to guide old Droug, he knows his way, by guess,  
Once start him on the road : but chirrup, none the less !  
The snow lies glib as glass and hard as steel, and soon  
You 'll have rise, fine and full, a marvel of a moon.  
Hold straight up, all the same, this lighted twist of pitch !  
Once home and with our friend Ivàn Ivànovitch,  
All 's safe : I have my pay in pouch, all 's right with me,

So I but find as safe you and our precious three !

Off, Droug !'—because the flames had reached us, and  
the men

Shouted ' But lend a hand, Dmitri—as good as ten !'

“So, in we bundled—I, and those God gave me once ;  
Old Droug, that's stiff at first, seemed youthful for the  
nonce :

He understood the case, galloping straight a-head.

Out came the moon : my twist soon dwindled, feebly red  
In that unnatural day—yes, daylight, bred between  
Moon-light and snow-light, lamped those grotto-depths  
which screen

Such devils from God's eye. Ah, pines, how straight you  
grow



Nor bend one pitying branch, true breed of brutal snow !  
Some undergrowth had served to keep the devils blind  
While one escaped outside their border !

“ Was that—wind ?

Anyhow, Droug starts, stops, back go his ears, he  
snuffs,

Snorts,—never such a snort ! then plunges, knows the  
sough 's

Only the wind : yet, no—our breath goes up too  
straight !

Still the low sound,—less low, loud, louder, at a rate

There's no mistaking more ! Shall I lean out—look—  
learn

The truth whatever it be ? Pad, pad ! At last, I turn—

"'T is the regular pad of the wolves in pursuit of the  
life in the sledge !

An army they are : close-packed they press like the  
thrust of a wedge :

They increase as they hunt : for I see, through the pine-  
trunks ranged each side,

Slip forth new fiend and fiend, make wider and still more  
wide

The four-footed steady advance. The foremost—none  
may pass :

They are elders and lead the line, eye and eye—green-  
glowing brass !

But a long way distant still. Droug, save us ! He does  
his best :

Yet they gain on us, gain, till they reach,—one reaches . . .

How utter the rest ?

O that Satan-faced first of the band ! How he lolls out  
the length of his tongue,

How he laughs and lets gleam his white teeth ! He is  
on me, his paws pry among

The wraps and the rugs ! O my pair, my twin-pigeons,  
lie still and seem dead !

Stepàn, he shall never have you for a meal,—here's your  
mother instead !

No, he will not be counselled—must cry, poor Stiòpka, so  
foolish ! though first

Of my boy-brood, he was not the best : nay, neighbours  
have called him the worst :

He was puny, an undersized slip,—a darling to me, all  
the same !

But little there was to be praised in the boy, and a plenty  
to blame.

I loved him with heart and soul, yes—but, deal him a  
blow for a fault,

He would sulk for whole days. ‘Foolish boy ! lie still  
or the villain will vault,

Will snatch you from over my head !’ No use ! he cries,  
screams,—who can hold

Fast a boy in a frenzy of fear ? It follows—as I foretold !  
The Satan-face snatched and snapped : I tugged, I tore  
—and then

His brother too needs must shriek ! If one must go, ’t is  
men

The Tsar needs, so we hear, not ailing boys ! Perhaps  
My hands relaxed their grasp, got tangled in the wraps :  
God, he was gone ! I looked : there tumbled the cursed  
crew,

Each fighting for a share : too busy to pursue !

That 's so far gain at least : Droug, gallop another verst

Or two, or three—God sends we beat them, arrive the

first !

A mother who boasts two boys was ever accounted rich :

Some have not a boy : some have, but lose him,—

God knows which

Is worse : how pitiful to see your weakling pine

And pale and pass away ! Strong brats, this pair of

mine !

“ O misery ! for while I settle to what near seems

Content, I am 'ware again of the tramp, and again there

gleams—

Point and point—the line, eyes, levelled green brassy  
fire !

So soon is resumed your chase? Will nothing appease,  
nought tire

The furies? And yet I think—I am certain the race is  
slack,

And the numbers are nothing like. Not a quarter of  
the pack !

Feasters and those full-fed are staying behind . . . Ah  
why?

We'll sorrow for that too soon ! Now,—gallop, reach  
home, and die,

Nor ever again leave house, to trust our life in the trap  
For life—we call a sledge ! Teriòscha, in my lap !

Yes, I'll lie down upon you, tight-tie you with the  
strings

Here—of my heart ! No fear, this time, your mother  
flings . . .

Flings ? I flung ? Never ! But think !—a woman,  
after all,

Contending with a wolf ! Save you I must and shall,  
Terenti !

“ How now ? What, you still head the race,  
Your eyes and tongue and teeth crave fresh food, Satan-  
face ?

There and there ! Plain I struck green fire out ! Flash  
again ?

All a poor fist can do to damage eyes proves vain !

My fist—why not crunch that ? He is wanton for . . .

O God,

Why give this wolf his taste ? Common wolves scrape  
and prod

The earth till out they scratch some corpse—mere putrid  
flesh !

Why must this glutton leave the faded, choose the fresh ?  
Terentiù—God, feel !—his neck keeps fast thy bag  
Of holy things, saints' bones, this Satan-face will drag  
Forth, and devour along with him our Pope declared  
The relics were to save from danger !

“ Spurned, not spared !

'T was through my arms, crossed arms, he—nuzzling  
now with snout,

Now ripping, tooth and claw—plucked, pulled Terentiù  
out,

A prize indeed ! I saw—how could I else but see ?—

My precious one—I bit to hold back—pulled from me !



Up came the others, fell to dancing—did the imps !—  
Skipped as they scampered round. There 's one is grey,  
and limps :

Who knows but old bad Màrpha,—she always owed me  
spite

And envied me my births,—skulks out of doors at night  
And turns into a wolf, and joins the sisterhood,  
And laps the youthful life, then slinks from out the wood,  
Squats down at door by dawn, spins there demure as erst  
—No strength, old crone,—not she !—to crawl forth half  
a verst !

“ Well, I escaped with one : 'twixt one and none there lies  
'The space 'twixt heaven and hell. And see, a rose-light  
dyes

The endmost snow : 't is dawn, 't is day, 't is safe at home !

We have outwitted you ! Ay, monsters, snarl and foam,

Fight each the other fiend, disputing for a share,—

Forgetful, in your greed, our finest off we bear

Tough Droug and I,—my babe, my boy that shall be man,

My man that shall be more, do all a hunter can

To trace and follow and find and catch and crucify

Wolves, wolfkins, all your crew ! A thousand deaths  
shall die

The whimperingest cub that ever squeezed the teat !

'Take that !' we'll stab you with,—'the tenderness we  
met

When, wretches, you danced round—not this, thank God  
—not this !

Hellhounds, we baulk you !'

“ But—Ah, God above !—Bliss, bliss—  
Not the band, no ! And yet—yes, for Droug knows  
him ! One—

Of them all, only this has said ‘ She saves a son ! ’

His fellows disbelieve such luck : but he believes,

He lets them pick the bones, laugh at him in their  
sleeves :

He’s off and after us,—one speck, one spot, one ball  
Grows bigger, bound on bound,—one wolf as good  
as all !

O but I know the trick ! Have at the snaky tongue !

That’s the right way with wolves ! Go, tell your mates  
I wrung

The panting morsel out, left you to howl your  
worst !

Now for it—now ! Ah me ! I know him—thrice-  
accurst

Satan-face,—him to the end my foe !

“ All fight’s in vain :

This time the green brass points pierce to my very brain.

I fall—fall as I ought—quite on the babe I guard :

I overspread with flesh the whole of him. Too hard

To die this way, torn piecemeal ? Move hence ? Not

I—one inch !

Gnaw through me, through and through : flat thus I lie

nor flinch !

O God, the feel of the fang furrowing my shoulder !—see !

It grinds—it grates the bone. O Kirill under me,

Could I do more ? Besides he knew wolf’s-way to win :

I clung, closed round like wax : yet in he wedged and in,  
Past my neck, past my breasts, my heart, until . . . how  
feels

The onion-bulb your knife parts, pushing through its  
peels,

Till out you scoop its clove wherein lie stalk and leaf  
And bloom and seed unborn?

“That slew me : yes, in brief,

I died then, dead I lay doubtlessly till Droug stopped

Here, I suppose. I come to life, I find me propped

Thus—how or when or why,—I know not. Tell me,  
friends,

All was a dream : laugh quick and say the nightmare  
ends !

Soon I shall find my house : 't is over there : in proof,  
Save for that chimney heaped with snow, you 'd see the  
roof

Which holds my three—my two—my one—not one?

“ Life's mixed

With misery, yet we live—must live. The Satan fixed  
His face on mine so fast, I took its print as pitch  
Takes what it cools beneath. Ivàn Ivànovitch,  
'T is you unharden me, you thaw, disperse the thing !  
Only keep looking kind, the horror will not cling.  
Your face smooths fast away each print of Satan. Tears  
—What good they do ! Life's sweet, and all its after-  
years,

Ivàn Ivànovitch, I owe you ! Yours am I !

May God reward you, dear ! ”

Down she sank. Solemnly

Ivàn rose, raised his axe,—for fitly, as she knelt,

Her head lay : well-apart, each side, her arms hung,—

dealt

Lightning-swift thunder-strong one blow—no need of

more !

Headless she knelt on still : that pine was sound at

core

(Neighbours were used to say)—cast-iron-kerneled—

which

Taxed for a second stroke Ivàn Ivànovitch.

The man was scant of words as strokes. “It had to be :

I could no other : God it was bade ‘Act for me !’”

Then stooping, peering round—what is it now he lacks ?

A proper strip of bark wherewith to wipe his axe.

Which done, he turns, goes in, closes the door behind.  
The others mute remain, watching the blood-snake wind  
Into a hiding-place among the splinter-heaps.

At length, still mute, all move : one lifts,—from where it  
steeps

Redder each ruddy rag of pine,—the head : two more  
Take up the dripping body : then, mute still as before,  
Move in a sort of march, march on till marching ends  
Opposite to the church ; where halting,—who suspends,  
By its long hair, the thing, deposits in its place  
The piteous head : once more the body shows no trace  
Of harm done : there lies whole the Lòuscha, maid and  
wife

And mother, loved until this latest of her life.



Then all sit on the bank of snow which bounds a space  
Kept free before the porch for judgment : just the place !

Presently all the souls, man, woman, child, which make  
The village up, are found assembling for the sake  
Of what is to be done. The very Jews are there :  
A Gipsy-troop, though bound with horses for the Fair,  
Squats with the rest. Each heart with its conception  
seethes

And simmers, but no tongue speaks : one may say,—  
none breathes.

Anon from out the church totters the Pope—the priest—  
Hardly alive, so old, a hundred years at least.  
With him, the Commune's head, a hoary senior too,

Stàrosta, that's his style,—like Equity Judge with you,—  
Natural Jurisconsult : then, fenced about with furs,  
Pomeschik,—Lord of the Land, who wields—and none  
demurs—

A power of life and death. They stoop, survey the  
corpse.

Then, straightened on his staff, the Stàrosta—the thorpe's  
Sagaciousest old man—hears what you just have heard,  
From Droug's first inrush, all, up to Ivàn's last word  
“ God bade me act for him : I dared not disobey ! ”

Silence—the Pomeschik broke with “ A wild wrong way  
Of righting wrong—if wrong there were, such wrath to  
rouse !

Why was not law observed? What article allows  
Whoso may please to play the judge, and, judgment  
dealt,  
Play executioner, as promptly as we pelt  
To death, without appeal, the vermin whose sole fault  
Has been—it dared to leave the darkness of its vault,  
Intrude upon our day ! Too sudden and too rash !  
What was this woman's crime? Suppose the church  
should crash  
Down where I stand, your lord : bound are my serfs to  
dare  
Their utmost that I 'scape : yet, if the crashing scare  
My children,—as you are,—if sons fly, one and all,  
Leave father to his fate,—poor cowards though I call  
The runaways, I pause before I claim their life

Because they prized it more than mine. I would each  
wife

Died for her husband's sake, each son to save his sire :

'T is glory, I applaud—scarce duty, I require.

Ivàn Ivànovitch has done a deed that 's named

Murder by law and me : who doubts, may speak un-  
blamed ! ”

All turned to the old Pope. “ Ay, children, I am old—

How old, I get myself to know no longer. Rolled

Quite round, my orb of life, from infancy to age,

Seems passing back again to youth. A certain stage

At least I reach, or dream I reach, where I discern

Truer truths, laws behold more lawlike than we learn

When first we set our foot to tread the course I trod

With man to guide my steps : who leads me now is God.

‘ Your young men shall see visions : ’ and in my youth

I saw

And paid obedience to man’s visionary law :

‘ Your old men shall dream dreams : ’ and, in my age,

a hand

Conducts me through the cloud round law to where I

stand

Firm on its base,—know cause, who, before, knew effect.

“ The world lies under me : and nowhere I detect

So great a gift as this—God’s own—of human life.

‘ Shall the dead praise thee ? ’ No ! ‘ The whole live

world is rife,

God, with thy glory,' rather ! Life then, God's best of  
gifts,

For what shall man exchange? For life—when so he  
shifts

The weight and turns the scale, lets life for life restore

God's balance, sacrifice the less to gain the more,

Substitute—for low life, another's or his own—

Life large and liker God's who gave it : thus alone

May life extinguish life that life may trulier be !

How low this law descends on earth, is not for me

To trace : complexed becomes the simple, intricate

The plain, when I pursue law's winding. 'T is the straight

Outflow of law I know and name : to law, the fount

Fresh from God's footstool, friends, follow while I  
remount.

“A mother bears a child : perfection is complete  
So far in such a birth. Enabled to repeat  
The miracle of life,—herself was born so just  
A type of womankind, that God sees fit to trust  
Her with the holy task of giving life in turn.  
Crowned by this crowning pride,—how say you, should  
    she spurn  
Regality—discrowned, unchilded, by her choice  
Of barrenness exchanged for fruit which made rejoice  
Creation, though life’s self were lost in giving birth  
To life more fresh and fit to glorify God’s earth ?  
How say you, should the hand God trusted with life’s  
    torch  
Kindled to light the world—aware of sparks that scorch,  
Let fall the same ? Forsooth, her flesh a fire-flake stings :

---

The mother drops the child ! Among what monstrous  
things

Shall she be classed ? Because of motherhood, each male  
Yields to his partner place, sinks proudly in the scale :

His strength owned weakness, wit—folly, and courage—  
fear,

Beside the female proved male's mistress—only here.

The fox-dam, hunger-pined, will slay the felon sire

Who dares assault her whelp : the beaver, stretched on  
fire,

Will die without a groan : no pang avails to wrest

Her young from where they hide—her sanctuary breast.

What's here then ? Answer me, thou dead one, as, I  
throw,

Standing at God's own bar, he bids thee answer now !



Thrice crowned wast thou—each crown of pride, a child  
—thy charge !

Where are they? Lost? Enough : no need that thou  
enlarge

On how or why the loss : life left to utter 'lost'

Condemns itself beyond appeal. The soldier's post

Guards from the foe's attack the camp he sentinels :

That he no traitor proved, this and this only tells—

Over the corpse of him trod foe to foe's success.

Yet—one by one thy crowns torn from thee—thou no less

To scare the world, shame God,—livedst ! I hold he

saw

The unexampled sin, ordained the novel law,

Whereof first instrument was first intelligence

Found loyal here. I hold that, failing human sense,

The very earth had oped, sky fallen, to efface  
Humanity's new wrong, motherhood's first disgrace.  
Earth oped not, neither fell the sky, for prompt was found  
A man and man enough, head-sober and heart-sound,  
Ready to hear God's voice, resolute to obey.  
Ivàn Ivànovitch, I hold, has done, this day,  
No otherwise than did, in ages long ago,  
Moses when he made known the purport of that flow  
Of fire athwart the law's twain-tables ! I proclaim  
Ivàn Ivànovitch God's servant !"

At which name

Uprose that creepy whisper from out the crowd, is wont  
To swell and surge and sink when fellow-men confront  
A punishment that falls on fellow flesh and blood,  
Appallingly beheld—shudderingly understood,

No less, to be the right, the just, the merciful.

“God’s servant !” hissed the crowd.

When that Amen grew dull

And died away and left acquittal plain adjudged,

“Amen !” last sighed the lord. “There’s none shall say

I grudged

Escape from punishment in such a novel case.

Deferring to old age and holy life,—be grace

Granted ! say I. No less, scruples might shake a

sense

Firmer than I boast mine. Law’s law, and evidence

Of breach therein lies plain,—blood-red-bright,—all may

see !

Yet all absolve the deed : absolved the deed must be !

“ And next—as mercy rules the hour—methinks ’t were  
well

You signify forthwith its sentence, and dispel

The doubts and fears, I judge, which busy now the head

Law puts a halter round—a halo—you, instead !

Ivàn Ivànovitch—what think you he expects

Will follow from his feat ? Go, tell him—law protects

Murder, for once : no need he longer keep behind

The Sacred Pictures—where skulks Innocence enshrined,

Or I missay ! Go, some ! You others, haste and hide

The dismal object there : get done, whate’er betide ! ”

So, while the youngers raised the corpse, the elders  
trooped

Silently to the house : where halting, someone stooped,

Listened beside the door ; all there was silent too.  
Then they held counsel ; then pushed door and, passing  
through,  
Stood in the murderer's presence.

Ivàn Ivànovitch

Knelt, building on the floor that Kremlin rare and rich  
He deftly cut and carved on lazy winter nights.  
Some five young faces watched, breathlessly, as, to rights,  
Piece upon piece, he reared the fabric nigh complete.  
Stèscha, Ivàn's old mother, sat spinning by the heat  
Of the oven where his wife Kàtia stood baking bread.  
Ivàn's self, as he turned his honey-coloured head,  
Was just in act to drop, 'twixt fir-cones,—each a dome,—  
The scooped-out yellow gourd presumably the home  
Of Kolokol the Big : the bell, therein to hitch,

—An acorn-cup—was ready : Ivàn Ivànovitch  
Turned with it in his mouth.

They told him he was free  
As air to walk abroad. “How otherwise?” asked he.

TRAY





*TRAY.*

Sing me a hero ! Quench my thirst

Of soul, ye bards !

Quoth Bard the first :

“ Sir Olaf, the good knight, did don

His helm and eke his habergeon . . . ”

Sir Olaf and his bard—— !

“ That sin-scathed brow ” (quoth Bard the second)

“ That eye wide ope as though Fate beckoned

My hero to some steep, beneath

Which precipice smiled tempting Death . . .”

You too without your host have reckoned !

“ A beggar-child ” (let ’s hear this third !)

“ Sat on a quay’s edge : like a bird

Sang to herself at careless play,

And fell into the stream. ‘ Dismay !

Help, you the standers-by !’ None stirred.

“ Bystanders reason, think of wives

And children ere they risk their lives.

Over the balustrade has bounced

A mere instinctive dog, and pounced

Plumb on the prize. ‘ How well he dives !

“ ‘Up he comes with the child, see, tight  
 In mouth, alive too, clutched from quite  
 A depth of ten feet—twelve, I bet !  
 Good dog ! What, off again ? There ’s yet  
 Another child to save ? All right !

“ ‘How strange we saw no other fall !  
 It ’s instinct in the animal.  
 Good dog ! But he ’s a long while under :  
 If he got drowned I should not wonder—  
 Strong current, that against the wall !

“ ‘Here he comes, holds in mouth this time  
 —What may the thing be ? Well, that ’s prime !  
 Now, did you ever ? Reason reigns

In man alone, since all Tray's pains  
Have fished—the child's doll from the slime !'

“ And so, amid the laughter gay,  
Trotted my hero off,—old Tray,—  
Till somebody, prerogated  
With reason, reasoned : ‘ Why he dived,  
His brain would show us, I should say.

“ ‘ John, go and catch—or, if needs be,  
Purchase that animal for me !  
By vivisection, at expense  
Of half-an-hour and eighteen pence,  
How brain secretes dog's soul, we 'll see ! ’ ”

NED BRATTS



*NED BRATTS.*

'T was Bedford Special Assize, one daft Midsummer's

Day :

A broiling blasting June,—was never its like, men say.

Corn stood sheaf-ripe already, and trees looked yellow

as that ;

Ponds drained dust-dry, the cattle lay foaming around

each flat.

Inside town, dogs went mad, and folks kept bibbing beer

While the parsons prayed for rain. 'T was horrible, yes

—but queer :

Queer—for the sun laughed gay, yet nobody moved a  
hand

To work one stroke at his trade : as given to understand  
That all was come to a stop, work and such worldly  
ways,

And the world's old self about to end in a merry blaze.

Midsummer's Day moreover was the first of Bedford  
Fair ;

So, Bedford Town's tag-rag and bobtail lay bousing there.

But the Court House, Quality crammed : through doors  
ope, windows wide,

High on the Bench you saw sit Lordships side by side.

There frowned Chief Justice Jukes, fumed learned  
Brother Small,



And fretted their fellow Judge : like threshers, one and  
all,

Of a reek with laying down the law in a furnace. Why?  
Because their lungs breathed flame—the regular crowd  
forbye—

From gentry pouring in—quite a nosegay, to be sure !

How else could they pass the time, six mortal hours  
endure

Till night should extinguish day, when matters might  
haply mend ?

Meanwhile no bad resource was—watching begin and end  
Some trial for life and death, in a brisk five minutes'  
space,

And betting which knave would 'scape, which hang, from  
his sort of face.

So, their Lordships toiled and moiled, and a deal of work  
was done

(I warrant) to justify the mirth of the crazy sun,  
As this and 't other lout, struck dumb at the sudden show  
Of red robes and white wigs, boggled nor answered  
“ Boh ! ”

When asked why he, Tom Styles, should not—because  
Jack Nokes

Had stolen the horse—be hanged : for Judges must have  
their jokes,

And louts must make allowance—let 's say, for some blue  
fly

Which punctured a dewy scalp where the frizzles stuck  
awry—

Else Tom had fleered scot-free, so nearly over and done

Was the main of the job. Full-measure, the gentles enjoyed their fun,

As a twenty-five were tried, rank puritans caught at prayer

In a cow-house and laid by the heels,—have at 'em, devil may care !—

And ten were prescribed the whip, and ten a brand on the cheek,

And five a slit of the nose—just leaving enough to tweak.

Well, things at jolly high-tide, amusement steeped in fire,  
While noon smote fierce the roof's red tiles to heart's desire,

The Court a-simmer with smoke, one ferment of oozy flesh,

One spirituous humming musk mount-mounting until its  
mesh

Entoiled all heads in a fluster, and Serjeant Postlethwayte  
—Dashing the wig oblique as he mopped his oily pate—  
Cried “ Silence, or I grow grease ! No loophole lets in  
air ?

Jurymen,—Guilty, Death ! Gainsay me if you dare ! ”  
—Things at this pitch, I say,—what hubbub without the  
doors ?

What laughs, shrieks, hoots and yells, what rudest of  
uproars ?

Bounce through the barrier-throng a bulk comes rolling  
vast !

Thumps, kicks,—no manner of use !—spite of them rolls  
at last

Into the midst a ball which, bursting, brings to view  
Publican Black Ned Bratts and Tabby his big wife  
too :

Both in a muck-sweat, both . . . were never such eyes  
uplift

At the sight of yawning hell, such nostrils—snouts that  
sniffed

Sulphur, such mouths a-gape ready to swallow flame !

Horrified, hideous, frank fiend-faces ! yet, all the same,  
Mixed with a certain . . . eh ? how shall I dare style—  
mirth

The desperate grin of the guess that, could they break  
from earth,

Heaven was above, and hell might rage in impotence  
Below the saved, the saved !

“ Confound you ! (no offence !)  
Out of our way,—push, wife ! Yonder their Worships  
be ! ”

Ned Bratts has reached the bar, and “ Hey, my Lords,”  
roars he,

“ A Jury of life and death, Judges the prime of the land,  
Constables, javelineers,—all met, if I understand,  
To decide so knotty a point as whether ’t was Jack or  
Joan

Robbed the henroost, pinched the pig, hit the King’s  
Arms with a stone,

Dropped the baby down the well, left the tithesman in  
the lurch,

Or, three whole Sundays running, not once attended  
church !

What a pother—do these deserve the parish-stocks or  
whip,

More or less brow to brand, much or little nose to snip,—

When, in our Public, plain stand we—that's we stand  
here,

I and my Tab, brass-bold, brick-built of beef and beer,

—Do not we, slut ? Stand forth and show your beauty,  
jade !

Wife of my bosom—that's the word now ! What a  
trade

We drove ! None said us nay : nobody loved his life

So little as wag a tongue against us,—did they, wife ?

Yet they knew us all the while, in their hearts, for what  
we are

—Worst couple, rogue and quean, unchanged—search  
near and far !

Eh, Tab ? The pedlar, now—o'er his noggin—who  
warned a mate

To cut and run, nor risk his pack where its loss of weight  
Was the least to dread,—aha, how we two laughed a-good  
As, stealing round the midden, he came on where I stood  
With billet poised and raised,—you, ready with the rope,—  
Ah, but that 's past, that 's sin repented of, we hope !

Men knew us for that same, yet safe and sound stood we !

The lily-livered knaves knew too (I've baulked a d——)

Our keeping the ' Pied Bull ' was just a mere pretence :



Too slow make food, drink, lodging, the pounds from out  
the pence !

There's not a stoppage has chanced to travel, this ten  
long year,

No break into hall or grange, no lifting of nag or steer,

Not a single roguery, from the cutting of a purse

To the cutting of a throat, but paid us toll. Od's curse !

When Gipsy Smouch made bold to cheat us of our due,

—Eh, Tab? the Squire's strong-box we helped the  
rascal to—

I think he pulled a face, next Sessions' swinging-time !

He danced the jig that needs no floor,—and, here's the  
prime,

'T was Scroggs that houghed the mare ! Ay, those were  
busy days !

“Well, there we flourished brave, like scripture-trees  
called bays,

Faring high, drinking hard, in money up to head

—Not to say, boots and shoes, when . . . Zounds, I  
nearly said—

Lord, to unlearn one’s language ! How shall we labour,  
wife ?

Have you, fast hold, the Book ? Grasp, grip it, for your  
life !

See, sirs, here’s life, salvation ! Here’s—hold but out  
my breath—

When did I speak so long without once swearing ?  
’Sdeath,

No, nor unhelped by ale since man and boy ! And yet  
All yesterday I had to keep my whistle wet

While reading Tab this Book : book ? don't say 'book'—

they 're plays,

Songs, ballads and the like : here 's no such strawy blaze,

But sky wide ope, sun, moon, and seven stars out full-

flare !

Tab, help and tell ! I 'm hoarse. A mug ! or—no, a

prayer !

Dip for one out of the Book ! Who wrote it in the Jail

—He plied his pen unhelped by beer, sirs, I 'll be bail !

“ I 've got my second wind. In trundles she—that 's Tab.

‘ Why, Gammer, what 's come now, that—bobbing like a

crab

On Yule-tide bowl—your head 's a-work and both your

eyes

Break loose? Afeard, you fool? As if the dead can  
rise !

Say—Bagman Dick was found last May with fuddling-cap  
Stuffed in his mouth : to choke 's a natural mishap !'

'Gaffer, be—blessed,' cries she, 'and Bagman Dick as  
well !

I, you, and he are damned : this Public is our hell :

We live in fire : live coals don't feel !—once quenched,  
they learn—

Cinders do, to what dust they moulder while they burn !'

“‘ If you don't speak straight out,' says I—belike I swore—

' A knobstick, well you know the taste of, shall, once  
more,

Teach you to talk, my maid !' She ups with such a face,  
Heart sunk inside me. 'Well, pad on, my prate-apace !'

" 'I've been about those laces we need for . . . never  
mind !

If henceforth they tie hands, 't is mine they'll have to  
bind.

You know who makes them best—the Tinker in our cage,  
Pulled-up for gospelling, twelve years ago : no age  
To try another trade,—yet, so he scorned to take  
Money he did not earn, he taught himself the make  
Of laces, tagged and tough—Dick Bagman found them  
so !

. Good customers were we ! Well, last week, you must  
know,

His girl,—the blind young chit, who hawks about his  
wares,—

She takes it in her head to come no more—such airs  
These hussies have ! Yet, since we need a stoutish lace,—  
“ I ’ll to the jail-bird father, abuse her to his face ! ”  
So, first I filled a jug to give me heart, and then,  
Primed to the proper pitch, I posted to their den—  
*Patmore*—they style their prison ! I tip the turnkey,  
catch

My heart up, fix my face, and fearless lift the latch—  
Both arms a-kimbo, in bounce with a good round oath  
Ready for rapping out : no “ Lawks ” nor “ By my troth ! ”

“ ‘ There sat my man, the father. He looked up : what  
one feels

When heart that leapt to mouth drops down again to  
heels !

He raised his hand . . . Hast seen, when drinking out  
the night,

And in, the day, earth grow another something quite  
Under the sun's first stare ? I stood a very stone.

“ “ Woman ! ” (a fiery tear he put in every tone),

“ How should my child frequent your house where lust is  
sport,

Violence—trade ? Too true ! I trust no vague report.

Her angel's hand, which stops the sight of sin, leaves  
clear

The other gate of sense, lets outrage through the ear.

What has she heard !—which, heard shall never be again.

Better lack food than feast, a Dives in the—wain  
Or reign or train—of Charles !” (His language was not  
ours :

’T is my belief, God spoke : no tinker has such powers).

“Bread, only bread they bring—my laces : if we broke  
Your lump of leavened sin, the loaf’s first crumb would  
choke !”

“ ‘Down on my marrow-bones ! Then all at once rose he :  
His brown hair burst a-spread, his eyes were suns to see :  
Up went his hands : “Through flesh, I reach, I read thy  
soul !

So may some stricken tree look blasted, bough and bole,  
Champed by the fire-tooth, charred without, and yet,  
thrice-bound



With dreriment about, within may life be found,  
A prisoned power to branch and blossom as before,  
Could but the gardener cleave the cloister, reach the core,  
Loosen the vital sap : yet where shall help be found?  
Who says 'How save it?'—nor 'Why cumpers it the  
ground?'

Woman, that tree art thou ! All sloughed about with  
scurf,  
Thy stag-horns fright the sky, thy snake-roots sting the  
turf !

Drunkenness, wantonness, theft, murder gnash and gnarl  
Thine outward, case thy soul with coating like the marle  
Satan stamps flat upon each head beneath his hoof !  
And how deliver such ? The strong men keep aloof,  
Lover and friend stand far, the mocking ones pass by,

Tophet gapes wide for prey : lost soul, despair and die !  
What then ? ‘Look unto me and be ye saved!’ saith  
God :  
‘I strike the rock, outstreats the life-stream at my rod !<sup>1</sup>  
Be your sins scarlet, wool shall they seem like,—although  
As crimson red, yet turn white as the driven snow !’ ”

“ ‘There, there, there ! All I seem to somehow under-  
stand  
Is—that, if I reached home, ’t was through the guiding  
hand  
Of his blind girl which led and led me through the streets  
And out of town and up to door again. What greets

---

<sup>1</sup> They did not eat  
His flesh, nor suck those oils which thence outstreat.

Donne's *Progress of the Soul*, line 344.

First thing my eye, as limbs recover from their swoon?  
A book—this Book she gave at parting. “ Father’s boon—  
The Book he wrote : it reads as if he spoke himself :  
He cannot preach in bonds, so,—take it down from shelf  
When you want counsel,—think you hear his very voice ! ”

“ ‘ Wicked dear Husband, first despair and then rejoice !  
Dear wicked Husband, waste no tick of moment more,  
Be saved like me, bald trunk ! There ’s greenness yet at  
core,

Sap under slough ! Read, read ! ’

“ Let me take breath, my lords !

I ’d like to know, are these—hers, mine, or Bunyan’s  
words?

I'm 'wilderred—scarce with drink,—nowise with drink  
alone !

You 'll say, with heat : but heat 's no stuff to split a  
stone

Like this black boulder—this flint heart of mine : the  
Book—

That dealt the crashing blow ! Sirs, here 's the fist that  
shook

His beard till Wrestler Jem howled like a just-lugged  
bear !

You had brained me with a feather : at once I grew  
aware

Christmas was meant for me. A burden at your back,  
Good Master Christmas ? Nay,—yours was that Joseph's  
sack,

—Or whose it was,—which held the cup,—compared  
with mine !

Robbery loads my loins, perjury cracks my chine,

Adultery . . . nay, Tab, you pitched me as I flung !

One word, I'll up with fist . . . No, sweet spouse, hold  
your tongue !

“I'm hasting to the end. The Book, sirs—take and  
read !

You have my history in a nutshell,—ay, indeed !

It must off, my burden ! See,—slack straps and into pit,

Roll, reach the bottom, rest, rot there—a plague on it !

For a mountain's sure to fall and bury Bedford Town,

'Destruction'—that's the name, and fire shall burn it  
down !

O 'scape the wrath in time ! Time's now, if not too  
late.

How can I pilgrimage up to the wicket-gate ?

Next comes Despond the slough : not that I fear to pull  
Through mud, and dry my clothes at brave House Beau-  
tiful—

But it's late in the day, I reckon : had I left years ago  
Town, wife, and children dear . . . Well, Christmas did,  
you know !—

Soon I had met in the valley and tried my cudgel's  
strength

On the enemy horned and winged, a-straddle across its  
length !

Have at his horns, thwick—thwack : they snap, see !  
Hoof and hoof—

Bang, break the fetlock-bones! For love's sake, keep  
aloof

Angels! I 'm man and match,—this cudgel for my  
flail,—

To thresh him, hoofs and horns, bat's wing and serpent's  
tail!

A chance gone by! But then, what else does Hopeful  
ding

Into the deafest ear except—hope, hope 's the thing?

Too late i' the day for me to thrid the windings: but

There 's still a way to win the race by death's short cut!

Did Master Faithful need climb the Delightful Mounts?

No, straight to Vanity Fair,—a fair, by all accounts,

Such as is held outside,—lords, ladies, grand and gay,—

Says he in the face of them, just what you hear me say.

And the Judges brought him in guilty, and brought him  
out

To die in the market-place—St. Peter's Green 's about  
The same thing : there they flogged, flayed, buffeted,  
lanced with knives,

Pricked him with swords,—I 'll swear, he'd full a cat's  
nine lives,—

So to his end at last came Faithful,—ha, ha, he !

Who holds the highest card ? for there stands hid, you  
see,

Behind the rabble-rout, a chariot, pair and all :

He 's in, he 's off, he 's up, through clouds, at trumpet-call.

Carried the nearest way to Heaven-gate ! Odds my  
life—

Has nobody a sword to spare ? not even a knife ?



Then hang me, draw and quarter ! Tab—do the same by  
her !

O Master Worldly-Wiseman . . . that's Master Inter-  
preter,

Take the will, not the deed ! Our gibbet's handy,  
close :

Forestall Last Judgment - Day ! Be kindly, not  
morose !

There wants no earthly judge-and-jurying : here we  
stand—

Sentence our guilty selves : so, hang us out of hand !

Make haste for pity's sake ! A single moment's loss

Means—Satan's lord once more : his whisper shoots  
across

All singing in my heart, all praying in my brain,

‘It comes of heat and beer!’—hark how he guffaws  
plain !

‘To-morrow you ’ll wake bright, and, in a safe skin, hug  
Your sound selves, Tab and you, over a foaming jug !  
You ’ve had such qualms before, time out of mind !’

He’s right !

Did not we kick and cuff and curse away, that night  
When home we blindly reeled, and left poor humpback  
Joe

I’ the lurch to pay for what . . . somebody did, you  
know !

Both of us maundered then ‘Lame humpback,—never  
more

Will he come limping, drain his tankard at our  
door !

He 'll swing, while—somebody . . .' Says Tab, 'No,  
for I 'll peach !'

'I 'm for you, Tab,' cries I, 'there's rope enough for  
each !'

So blubbered we, and bussed, and went to bed upon  
The grace of Tab's good thought : by morning, all was  
gone !

We laughed—'What's life to him, a cripple of no  
account ?'

Oh, waves increase around—I feel them mount and  
mount !

Hang us ! To-morrow brings Tom Bearward with his  
bears :

One new black-muzzled brute beats Sackerson, he  
swears :

(Sackerson, for my money !) And, baiting o'er, the Brawl  
They lead on Turner's Patch,—lads, lasses, up tails all,—  
I 'm i' the thick o' the throng ! That means the Iron  
Cage,  
—Means the Lost Man inside ! Where 's hope for such  
as wage  
War against light ? Light 's left, light 's here, I hold  
light still,  
So does Tab—make but haste to hang us both ! You  
will ? ”

I promise, when he stopped you might have heard a  
mouse  
Squeak, such a death-like hush sealed up the old Mote  
House.

But when the mass of man sank meek upon his knees,  
While Tab, alongside, wheezed a hoarse "Do hang us,  
please !"

Why, then the waters rose, no eye but ran with tears,  
Hearts heaved, heads thumped, until, paying all past  
arrears

Of pity and sorrow, at last a regular scream outbroke  
Of triumph, joy and praise.

My Lord Chief Justice spoke,  
First mopping brow and cheek, where still, for one that  
budded,

Another bead broke fresh : "What Judge, that ever judged  
Since first the world began, judged such a case as this?  
Why, Master Bratts, long since, folks smelt you out, I  
wis !

I had my doubts, i' faith, each time you played the fox  
Convicting geese of crime in yonder witness-box—  
Yea, much did I misdoubt, the thief that stole her eggs  
Was hardly goosey's self at Reynard's game, i' feggs !  
Yet thus much was to praise—you spoke to point,  
direct—

Swore you heard, saw the theft : no jury could suspect—  
Dared to suspect,—I'll say,—a spot in white so clear :  
Goosey was throttled, true : but thereof godly fear  
Came of example set, much as our laws intend ;  
And, though a fox confessed, you proved the Judge's  
friend.

What if I had my doubts? Suppose I gave them breath,  
Brought you to bar : what work to do, ere 'Guilty,  
Death'

Had paid our pains ! What heaps of witnesses to drag  
From holes and corners, paid from out the County's  
bag !

Trial three dog-days long ! *Amicus Curie*—that 's  
Your title, no dispute—truth-telling Master Bratts !  
Thank you, too, Mistress Tab ! Why doubt one word  
you say ?

Hanging you both deserve, hanged both shall be this  
day !

The tinker needs must be a proper man. I 've heard  
He lies in Jail long since : if Quality 's good word  
Warrants me letting loose,—some householder, I mean—  
Freeholder, better still,—I don't say but—between  
Now and next Sessions . . . Well ! Consider of his  
case,

I promise to, at least : we owe him so much grace.  
Not that—no, God forbid !—I lean to think, as you,  
The grace that such repent is any jail-bird's due :  
I rather see the fruit of twelve years' pious reign—  
Astræa Redux, Charles restored his rights again !  
—Of which, another time ! I somehow feel a peace  
Stealing across the world. May deeds like this in-  
crease !

So, Master Sheriff, stay that sentence I pronounced  
On those two dozen odd : deserving to be trounced  
Soundly, and yet,—well, well, at all events despatch  
This pair of—shall I say, sinner-saints ?—ere we  
catch

Their jail-distemper too. Stop tears, or I 'll indite  
All weeping Bedfordshire for turning Bunyanite ! ”



So, happily hanged were they,—why lengthen out my  
tale?—

Where Bunyan's Statue stands facing where stood his  
Jail.



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